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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 009303

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LONDON FOR TSOU, PARIS FOR ZEYA  
DEPT FOR NEA/ARPI SHUKAN AND AMBASSADOR OBERWETTER, INL,  
DRL, PRM

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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [SA](#)

SUBJECT: MUNICIPAL COUNCILS UPDATE: REMAINING HALF  
APPOINTED BY SAG

REF: A. JEDDAH 04398

[B](#). JEDDAH 04300

[C](#). RIYADH 04593

[D](#). RIYADH 02912

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael Gfoeller for  
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#). (C) SUMMARY: On December 15, the Saudi press announced that King Abdullah had completed the long delayed process of forming the country's 178 municipal councils. Half of the councils' members, totaling 592 officials in all, were chosen last spring in the Kingdom's first democratic, albeit limited, elections, from which women in particular were excluded. On December 14, the Saudi government (SAG) appointed the remaining half of the council members, who also number 592, in a decree formally issued by the King and Crown Prince Sultan. Coming eight months after the initial voting, the announcement pleasantly surprised local observers. It renews hope that the political reform process is moving forward, even if at a cautious pace. It marks another milestone in a process that began with the 1977 decision to re-establish municipal councils, a 2003 cabinet decision to hold elections for half of the council seats, an October 2004 timetable for holding elections, and the successful completion of the elections in April 2005 (reftels). END SUMMARY.

[2](#). (C) Saudi citizens with whom the Embassy and Consulates Jeddah and Dhahran spoke about this development welcomed the important news, but stressed that only a small step has been taken along the road to political reform. They emphasized that the municipal councils are expected to serve only in an advisory capacity in the technical administration of municipalities, though the exact responsibilities and functions of the councils remain to be formally defined. They questioned when the municipal councils will first meet. They also emphasized that decision-making and policy-making remain at the top of the SAG and have not been delegated to lower levels, much less to the municipal councils. They emphasized that the traditional majles and right to petition to the King is no longer suitable or sufficient to the KSA's larger population and more complex society. The consensus view is that while it is significant that the concept of electing government officials has been introduced in the KSA, political change is still insufficient and moving slowly.

[3](#). (C) Human Rights First President Ibrahim Al-Mugaiteeb (protect) stressed that the SAG should enact further reforms, especially freedom of speech and association. Political Scientist, author, and commentator Turki Al-Hamad (protect) stressed the need for the SAG to construct an infrastructure of democracy, which should include: preparing the public to participate in government and support democracy; checks and balances; freedom of speech; freedom of the press; freedom of assembly; and an expanded electorate. He stressed the need for broad, important educational reforms, noting that since 1979 Saudi curricula have not taught students how to think independently and creatively.

[4](#). (C) Unlike before 1979, students have not been taught non-Islamic history, world history, or about other cultures and religions, al-Hamad noted. He stressed that the KSA and SAG have been very slow to reform because leaders want painless, non-disruptive, non-controversial change, a near impossibility and contradiction in terms, in his view. He warned that the longer the SAG delays change, the higher the price and potentially greater the consequences. He stressed that elections without rights and freedoms mean "little to nothing." He called for focusing more on ensuring rights and freedoms. With the requisite infrastructure and support, Al-Hamad believes, it will not matter as much if conservatives and religious extremists dominate future elections.

[5](#). (C) Eastern Province businessmen either were indifferent or welcomed this small move toward democracy while expressing concern about the composition of the municipal councils. They expressed concern in particular that conservatives and religious extremists might dominate the councils. In Riyadh,

Saudi citizens told emboffs that they were pleasantly surprised by the news that the SAG had completed formation of the municipal councils, since many people had come to the conclusion that "the process was dead," as one Riyadhhi put it. Riyadhhis and Jeddawis also noted that they wanted to study the lists of those appointed to the councils by the SAG, particularly in order to see if the government had appointed religious conservatives to the new bodies.

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COMMENT  
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16. (C) Despite the fact that half of the municipal council members were appointed by the SAG and only a limited electorate, which excluded women voters, participated in the Spring 2005 elections, King Abdullah's decision to complete formation of the councils represents a significant step toward political reform. In the last analysis, today there are 592 elected officials on 178 officially formed municipal councils in the Kingdom, while yesterday there were none. It is also hard to believe that the timing of this announcement, on the very day of the Iraqi parliamentary elections, could be an accident. The SAG carefully follows the political calendar in the region and has been monitoring the Iraqi situation very closely.

17. (C) The long awaited formation of the municipal councils may well signal that the SAG, in its own cautious way, understands the trend in the region toward greater popular participation in political life and governance, and wishes, albeit in its own cautious manner, to take part. We will monitor the situation to see when and how the new councils begin operation and, in septels, report on the council members the SAG has appointed. END COMMENT.  
GFOELLER